

THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY AND ST. AUGUSTINE'S DIVINE ILLUMINATION

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Abstract

The inquiry into the origin, certainty and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion and assent has been the task of most philosophers of all epochs. Consequent upon this quest, most philosophers have emerged with their divergent thoughts as answers to the epistemological questions bordering on the ultimate foundation of human knowledge. Meanwhile, while some have adopted skepticism as a method for the discovery of the foundation of new knowledge, others upheld rationalism and the rest opined empiricism. This paper is about to delve into St. Augustine's position with regard to the possibility of certainty of knowledge. Succinctly, Augustine's theory of knowledge departed with an affirmation of the possibility and accessibility of human knowledge. Epistemology for him serves a practical religious purpose. It helps us live a happy life only when it brings us to the author of truth (God). To attain these objectives, Augustine became concerned with the quest for certainty and this certainty can be attained through what he calls divine illumination. This work therefore wishes to cast a critical look at St. Augustine's Divine Illumination as a means of attaining epistemological certainty (truth).

Keywords: Truth, Certainty, Augustine, Divine Illumination, Epistemology

Introduction

The tradition of philosophy is one that has held knowledge as its utmost priority. Little wonder Daniel A. Kaufman maintained that the mainline tradition in philosophy has held knowledge as its highest aim and has shown little interest in wisdom.¹ But however, the nature of knowledge and its relation to certainty, belief and doubt has been a philosophical topic ever since the beginning of philosophy. From time immemorial, man has been puzzled with the reality and authenticity of

¹ DANIEL A. KAUFMAN, *Knowledge, Wisdom, and the Philosophers*, Philosophy, The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, Vol. 81, no. 315, January 2006, 141.

what he believes. The question of “how can we justify our belief? How plausible is that which we believe? How certain is that which we know? has preoccupied man and his philosophy. The ancient philosophers established a number of certainties about knowledge that (1) knowledge can only be of what is true (2) A belief in only knowledge if it can appeal to some kind of warrant (3) one who claims knowledge must have a resolute commitment to the position claimed to be known.² This implies that if one claims to know something, then one excludes the possibility of that being at some later time rightly converted to a different view.

From the common-sense parlance, certainty is the claim that an object of knowledge is objectively what it is independently of every relative density like biases, subjective interpretations etc. for example, a tree is a tree independently of the sentiments of the subject, i.e., whether or not he sees this to be the case.

Omogbe, therefore, defines certainty to be one of the conditions or characterizations of knowledge. For him, before a person can claim knowledge of anything, it must be certain that it is really the case. He goes further to state that acquaintance is a necessary tool for certainty in that one must have some kind of direct encounter with a thing before one can claim knowledge of the thing.³ Thus, all knowledge must be certain in order to be worthy of the name.⁴ Consequently, a certain or valid judgment is often found to be objective. In fact, the certainty or validity of judgment lies solely on objectivity. Meanwhile, objectivity from its latin etymology *Objectum* means, ‘that which stands out or that which is out there, pure and uncorrupted by prejudices or biases; that which is above doubts, opinions, beliefs etc. That which is objective possesses an undeniable property.

P. Glenn argues that the validity or certainty of judgment is based directly upon the objectivity of the ideas used in the judgment. P. Glenn is arguing that the object of our judgment must be valid and objective. For him, “the human mind enunciates judgment by reason of evidence which the mind discovers in the ideas themselves or upon reliable authority”.⁵ However, he averred that there can be erroneous judgments due to accidental causes, chief of which is precipitations of mind in pronouncing before the evidence is properly obtained and evaluated.⁶

² Anthony Kenny, *Knowledge, Belief, and Faith*, The Journal of the Royal Institute, Vol. 82, no. 321, July 2007, 381.

³ OMOREGBE J., *Epistemology, a Systematic and Historical Study*, Lagos: Joja Press Limited, 1998, 17.

⁴ Cf. OMOREGBE J., *Epistemology, a Systematic and Historical Study*, 17.

⁵ P. J. GLENN, *Criteriology*, p. 224

⁶ P. J. GLENN, *Criteriology*, p. 224

Glenn sought to show that judgment when legitimately evidenced is true and certain. Therefore, he outlined four cardinal points upon which stands a certain judgment. They are self-evidence, relation of ideas, fact of experience and authority.

In his work entitled *Truth or Throws*, (How to over – throw opponents’ arguments). Protagoras begins with his famous claim “Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are, and of the things that are not that they are not”⁷. This implies that truth is relative, there is no objective truth. The world is for each person as it appears to that person. For example, if the same wind appears cold to one person and warm to another person, then the wind is warm to the person to whom it appears warm and is cold to the person to whom it seems cold. But since man is the centre of everything, it therefore follows that all perceptions are true and the ordinary view is mistaken, according to which, in cases of conflict, one person is right and the other person is wrong about the quality of the wind or of anything else. Thus truth becomes relative. Thus, Protagoras’ doctrine poses a great problem to certainty of knowledge.

Gorgias on his part denied the possibility of knowledge. He holds that nothing exists, and that if anything did exist nobody could really understand it, and that even if you could understand it, you could not communicate it. According to him, to communicate requires the use of words, but words are only symbols, and a symbol is always different from that which it is supposed to refer to; and so we all get hung up on words. In the final analysis Gorgias concluded that nothing can be known. But how tenable is his position? We really know that human faculties can indeed, know and communicate ideas else how did Gorgias think we will understand him in the first place.

The quest for certainty still advanced in the Renaissance period. Michel de Montaigne orchestrated for the Renaissance a captivating version of classical skepticism. The French thinker made some positive submissions as regards skepticism as he sought to destroy superstition, prejudice and error. He accepted the judgments of the skeptics, who held that “there is no more likelihood that this is true than that it is false.”⁸ Thus Montaigne saw in skepticism a liberating force, which would in the end make doubt superfluous because one would never make any permanent commitment to any doctrines but would assume a perpetual mood

⁷ PROTAGORAS, *Truth in Benjamin Jowett, Dialogues of Plato*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953, p.612

⁸ MICHEL. MONTAIGNE, *The Essays, in the Great Books of the Western World*, trans. Donald M. Frame, Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1952, p.284

of inquiry. He showed that the criteria employed to determine standards of judgments are themselves open to question and doubt, unless God gives us some indubitable first principles and make our faculties reliable. Unaided by grace, all of man's achievements are dubious. To reinforce this view, he writes: The more we cast ourselves back on God and commit ourselves to him, and renounce ourselves, the better we are. Receive things thankfully says the preacher, in the aspect and taste that they are offered to thee, from day to day; the rest is beyond thy knowledge.⁹

Because of the intricate nature of knowledge, Montaigne holds that contentment was possible only when one achieves the tranquility of the mind. What disturbs this tranquility, Montaigne contends is the attempt to go beyond our ordinary experiences and penetrate the inner nature of things. Thus, he agreed with the Pyrrhonians to suspend judgments with regard to knowledge as he says, "Is it not better to remain in suspense than to entangle yourself in many errors that human fancy has produced? Is it not better to suspend your conviction than to get mixed up in these seditions and quarrelsome divisions?"¹⁰ Thus Montaigne showed the inability of man to find truth by means of his natural capacities and his need to rely on faith as his sole access to truth. But this position of Montaigne is problematic because it leaves everything at the mercy of God. Hence, may be tantamount to blind credulity.

However, Locke set out to describe what knowledge consists of, how it could be obtained, and to determine the limits and describe what constitutes intellectual certainty. Locke stated his aim categorically when he says, that his purpose is to inquire into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge¹¹. Thus, for Locke, human faculty can attain intellectual certainty. For him, "all ideas come from sensation or reflection"¹². Hence, knowledge comes from external sensible objects, or from the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves. At birth, the mind is like a blank slate until experience writes knowledge on them. He criticized and rejected the view that knowledge is innate as held by the rationalists. To this, he says, "I know it is a received doctrine that men have native ideas, and original characters stamped upon their minds in their

⁹ MICHEL . MONTAIGNE, *The Essays, in the Great Books of the Western World*, p.283

¹⁰ MICHEL . MONTAIGNE, *The Essays, in the Great Books of the Western World*,p.282

¹¹ JOHN. LOCKE, *Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, ed., R. Wool House London: Penguin Books., 2004, p.23

¹² JOHN. LOCKE, *Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, p.25

first being”¹³. Locke was particularly concerned to expose the groundless claim for innate ideas as held by the rationalists. He argued against such innate ideas like logical rules. For him, such rules might be self-evident to those who have intellectual training and not automatically grasped by people who are feeble minded or even babies. Thus, he pointed out that the doctrine of innate ideas as rather superfluous because it contains nothing that he could not explain in terms of his empirical account of his origin of ideas.

Locke’s epistemology comes to the fore when he presented the view of what can be known. He postulated three factors in the process of knowing, namely: the external objects, the ideas or representations in the mind, and the mind. The mind, he maintains knows the ideas, but never knows the object. Whenever the mind tries to know the object, the ideas insist on intervening and getting known instead. This is referred to as Representative Realism. Thus, the immediate object of human knowledge is ideas. This implies that we have no direct knowledge of things themselves, but only our ideas about them. When we perceive things, we are not getting them directly, but are getting a copy of them from our senses. Locke contends that the world is not directly presented to our senses, but is represented by them. Standing between our ideas and the world is our perceptual apparatus. Thus, we come to know objects of the world not directly, but rather through perceptions.

However, John Locke’s epistemology poses great problems to epistemological certainty; In an attempt to solve the problems created by the Lockean thesis, Berkeley holds that Locke’s representative realism leads to skepticism¹⁴. In his attempts to rid humanity of skepticism, he developed a theory of knowledge termed immaterialism or idealism. He argued that material substances apart from their perceptual qualities are utterly unknowable and should be unthinkable.

Berkeley’s fundamental view was that for something to exist, it must either be perceived or else be the active being that does the perceiving. Thus, he came to his classic conclusion that “to be is to be perceived, *esse est percipi*.”¹⁵ He did not believe that we could know anything that we cannot perceive, “their *esse* is *percipi*.”¹⁶ For Berkeley, knowledge is said to be certain if and only if it can be perceived. Berkeley therefore destroyed the bridge which will get us from directly perceived ideas and

¹³ JOHN. LOCKE, *Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, p.24

¹⁴ GEORGE. BERKELEY, *Principles of Human Knowledge and the Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, ed., R. Wool house London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2004 p.4

¹⁵ GEORGE. BERKELEY, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, p.10

¹⁶ GEORGE. BERKELEY, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, p.54

things unlike Locke. He says that the ideas we directly perceive are things. Our ideas of rivers, mountains, tables and chairs are those rivers and mountains, tables and chairs. He made his point clearer when he says, "Those immediate objects of perception, which according to [some] are only appearances of things, I take to be the real things themselves."¹⁷ He rejected the distinction between ideas and things and says that ideas are things. It is good to note that Berkeley did not deny the existence of phenomenal world.

Sequel to the problem of epistemological certainty, Bertrand Russell in his work entitled *Problems of Philosophy* exposed the difficulties involved in the attempt to arrive at certain knowledge. He acknowledges that the senses give us knowledge even though the knowledge derived from them is doubtful. According to him, there is hardly any knowledge that cannot be subjected to doubt. In fact, he questions the possibility of certain knowledge as he says, "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt?"¹⁸ There are lots of factors that play up in our attempt to know. Our senses if not well guarded could mislead us to take illusions for reality. Little wonder it has been observed that, "the senses are rather unreliable witnesses to the truth."¹⁹ As a result of the deceptive nature of our senses, Russell says that "we assume as certain many things which, on closer scrutiny, are found to be so full of apparent contradictions that only a great amount of thought enables us to know what it is that we may believe."²⁰ Often times, we see a straw inside a bottle of beer and to our senses, it appears bent. Similarly, when we look at a Volkswagen from the top of a three-story building, it appears long but in reality, these are not true.

In a résumé, the sense – datum prevents us from knowing with certainty what the objects are. Whenever we want to know, this sense datum intervenes and getting known instead. This at the long run makes our knowledge of the objects vague and unclear thus posing a big problem to certain and indubitable knowledge which is the main goal of all epistemological inquiry.

St. Augustine's Theory of Knowledge

¹⁷ GEORGE. BERKELEY, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, p.11

¹⁸ BERTRAND. RUSSELL, *Problems of Philosophy*, London: Oxford University Press, 1912, p.1

¹⁹ EGBEKE. AJA, *Elements of Theory of Knowledge*, Enugu Magnet Business Enterprises, 2004, p.147

²⁰ BERTRAND. RUSSELL, *Problems of Philosophy*, p.1

Saint Augustine (354 – 430 AD) is one of the greatest thinkers of this era. In his *Contra Academicos*, Augustine stood against the position of the Academic skeptics who believe that nothing can be known for certain and as such advocated for withdrawal of assent. On the contrary, Augustine holds that the human mind can attain certain knowledge. He made this clearer when he said that “man can attain certitude in regard to philosophic truths.”²¹ His main purpose in his *Contra Academicos* was to rid human mind of the arguments of Academicians. This aim, he stated clearly as he writes:

I purposed by the most cogent reasoning I could muster to rid my mind of the arguments of the Academics. For they cause many to despair of finding truth and prevent the wise man from assenting to anything or granting anything at all as clear and manifest, since to them everything appears obscure and uncertain.²²

For Augustine, human mind can attain knowledge and he saw knowledge not as an end in itself but as a tunnel through which the soul searches for the Absolute Truth. Epistemology for him serves a practical religious purpose. It helps us live a happy life only when it brings us to the author of truth (God). To attain these objectives, Augustine became concerned with the quest for certainty.

Overcoming Skepticism

For a time, Augustine took the Skeptics seriously, especially with regard to the skeptics’ stand that “no truth can be comprehended by human beings.” But after his conversion, his problem was no longer whether people can attain certainty but rather ‘how they can attain it’. Augustine therefore sought to answer the Skeptics, and he did this first of all by showing that human reason does indeed have certainty about various things. Specifically, human reason is absolutely certain of the principle of contradiction. We know that a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time. Using this principle, we can be certain, for example, that there is either one world or many worlds, and if there are many, their number is either finite or infinite. What we know here is simply that both alternatives cannot be true. This is not yet any substantive knowledge, but it meant for Augustine that we are not hopelessly lost in uncertainty. Not only do we know that both alternatives cannot be true simultaneously, we know also that this is always,

²¹ ST. AUGUSTINE, *Against the Academics*, trans Mary Patricia Garney, (Milwaukee: Margret Uni. Press, 1957), p.5

²²ST. AUGUSTINE, *Against the Academics*, p. 97

eternally, the case. In addition, he said that even the Skeptics would have to admit that the act of doubting is itself a form of certainty – the certainty that I exist. For if I doubt, I must exist. Whatever else I can have doubts about, I cannot doubt that I doubt. Furthermore, Augustine refutes the next part of the skeptic claim that the senses cannot give us any knowledge. For him, the senses present us with the data which reason interprets and make conclusions. With these, Augustine laid the foundation for his Epistemology.

Augustine's theory of knowledge is likened to Platonic rationalism although there are slight differences. The senses for Augustine are created by God and have the specific functions in the attainment of knowledge but they cannot give us eternal knowledge. They serve only as gateways through which the intellect or soul operates. Hence, the eternal and highest truths are seen in the intellect. To the question about the nature of knowledge found in the intellect, Augustine applies Plato's theory of Forms. For him, the idea of beauty can be judged using the non-sensible Form of beauty in our mind. Notwithstanding the application of the Platonic tradition by Augustine, he was aware of the biblical claim that the soul is made in the image of God in whom we find the ultimate truth.

Process of knowledge

Augustine may have found Plato's theory on reminiscence very palpable to uphold but its theological implications do not correspond to the teachings of the church. Therefore, he answers the question about how the mind comes to possess the truth with his theory of divine illumination (divine aid). Previously, Plato had believed that the mind retains some knowledge after reincarnation but Augustine opined rather that we discover eternal truth through the illumination of the mind by the divine illumination. Augustine never detailed the process of this illumination, albeit: he says that divine illumination is to the mind what the sun is to the eyes. This process is not religion bound because even the pagans experience illumination.

Although, Augustine never detailed the process of this illumination but for him, illumination comes from God just as light is shed by the sun. In short, divine illumination is not a process by which the content of ideas is infused into our minds; it is, rather, the illumination of our judgment whereby we are able to discern that certain ideas contain necessary and eternal truths. God, the source of this light, is perfect and eternal, and the human intellect operates under the influence of God's eternal ideas. This does not mean that our human mind can

know God. But it does mean that divine illumination allows us to overcome the limitations of knowledge caused by the mutability of physical objects and the finitude of our minds. With this theory, then, Augustine solved to his satisfaction the problem of how the human intellect is able to go beyond sense objects and make judgments about necessary and eternal truths.

Synthesis between Reason and Faith

Augustine is intimately connected with a long-standing discussion throughout the Middle Age regarding the connection between faith and reason. The central issue is determining whether important philosophical and religious beliefs are grounded in the authority of faith or reason, or some combination of the two. Take, for example, the origin of the cosmos, a subject about which philosophers and theologians alike have offered different views since antiquity. Perhaps the world naturally emerged from a swirling vortex of primordial stuff; perhaps it resulted from the accidental collision of atoms; perhaps it was created by a divine being or beings. In attempting to sort through the possibilities, do we rely on faith or reason as our guide? The faith option involves an attitude of trust that is grounded in divine revelation; the reason option, by contrast, involves belief that is grounded methodical demonstration.

When addressing the faith-reason issue, the early Christian theologian Tertullian came down decisively on the side of faith, which we see in two famous statements from him. First, he rhetorically asks, “what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” - His point being that reason (Athens) has nothing to do with faith (Jerusalem). Second, when facing contradictions regarding the Christian concept of reincarnation, Tertullian says, “I believe because it is absurd” - his point being that faith is so distinct from reason that faith is essentially irrational. Religious faith, he contends, is both contrary to and superior to reason.

Augustine’s position on the relation between faith and reason is considerably more moderate but still gives priority to faith. For Augustine, faith illuminates reason and without faith there could be no understanding. Inspired by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who maintained, “*Unless you believe, you will not understand,*” Augustine’s view is encapsulated in the expression “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectionem*). For Augustine, true philosophy was inconceivable without a joining of faith and reason in this way. He solidified this statement in these statements: “Since divine truth and scripture clearly teach us that God, the creator of all things, is Wisdom, a true philosopher will be a lover of

God. That does not mean that all who answer to the name are really in love with genuine wisdom, for it is one thing to be and another to be called a philosopher.”²³

To understand the concrete condition of human existence, we must first consider ourselves from the point of view of the Christian faith, and this in turn requires that the whole world be considered from the vantage point of faith. Reason according to Augustine is a friend to faith or better put, philosophy is the handmaid of theology (*Philosophia ancillia Theologia*). As spectacular as this statement may be, Augustine still believes that reason cannot function properly without the aid of faith. As he puts it: “faith seeks, understanding finds; whence the prophet says, unless ye believe, ye shall not understand.”

Interpreting Augustine’s Illumination Theory

The approaches to interpreting Augustine’s illumination theory that late Medieval and modern thinkers have taken can be classified into two main categories; as an extrinsic force, including ontologism and innatism, and the three closely related interpretations: Franciscanism, idealism, and formalism etc.

Ontologism

The seventeenth-century Cartesian philosopher Nicholas Malebranche is the most famous proponent of the ontologist interpretation of illumination, although earlier Renaissance figures such as Marsilio Ficino also espoused this theory, as did nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars like Vincenzo Gioberti, G. Ubaghs, and Johannes Hessen.²⁴ Malebranche operated on the dualist assumption that the body and the mind do not interact. On the basis of this assumption, he contended that the only way to know the world is to see it ‘in God’. For Malebranche, in other words, the divine light immediately imparts the content of knowledge, whether sensible or intellectual, by allowing the intellect to see things as they subsist in the mind of God. Divine illumination thus performs the intellect’s cognitive work on its behalf and gives it certitude with respect to its ideas, which are divinely given.

The most obvious problem with the ontologist interpretation is that it seems to provide premature recourse to the thoughts or even the vision of God. It also

²³ ST. AUGUSTINE, *The City of God*. Trans. Gerald G. Walsh, et al, New York: Image Books, 1958, p.50

²⁴ RONALD. NASH, *The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine’s theory of know*, Lexington: Uni. Pres, Kentucky, 1969, p.102

appears to bypass the empirical sources of human knowledge and natural cognitive processes, and thus undermines the faculties of sensation and imagination, precluding an account of the way knowledge is acquired through abstractive or discursive reasoning. Because all the mind has is fully and directly afforded by God, the ideas the mind entertains and its certitude about them do not really seem to be based on a person's own experiences and efforts to understand reality.²⁵ On the ontologist interpretation, the mind's role in its own act of knowing is virtually eliminated.

Innatism

The interpretation of Augustinian illumination most commonly assumed by contemporary scholars is an innatist one, such as the one John Rist espouses.²⁶ Rist believes that Augustine formulated his illumination theory for two main reasons. The first reason was to rebut the claims of the global academic sceptics who were influential in Augustine's day.²⁷ On Rist's account, Augustine accepted the Platonic distinction between sensible and intelligible realities. In order to annihilate the threat of scepticism that accompanies the belief that perceptual experience cannot afford true and certain knowledge, Rist holds that Augustine had to prove that the mind has access to eternal and unchanging intelligible truths, which is what he does when he develops his doctrine of divine illumination in the early dialogue *De magistro*.

The second, related reason for formulating an illumination account, which becomes clear in *De magistro*, is to affirm the possibility of teaching and learning. Owing to the transience of sense knowledge and the total depravity of the fallen mind, According to Rist, Augustine concludes that human beings have no recourse to truth.²⁸ If they are to teach and learn anything, consequently, they must already innately know what they teach or learn. Moreover, they must know truth in a direct or immediate sense, as Plato supposedly taught, if knowledge is to be absolutely certain.²⁹ Although Augustine rejected in *De magistro* the Platonic notion that acquiring knowledge simply entails recollecting ideas perceived before birth, Rist contends that he continued to affirm that the mind is equipped with the innate knowledge of certain immaterial principles (*rationes*) or impressed ideas not

²⁵ RONALD. NASH, *The Light of the Mind*, p.104

²⁶ JOHN. RIST, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

²⁷ JOHN. RIST, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p.42

²⁸ JOHN. RIST, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p.29

²⁹ JOHN. RIST, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p.74

unlike Plato's Forms, which ultimately subsist in the mind of God. Although the ideas "are no longer retained memories of a previous life, they are in some sense constitutive of the human soul."³⁰ Rist admits that it is difficult to determine just how many of these innate ideas Augustine counts as residing in the mind. Still, he insists that they are, for Augustine, the rules of judgment that cannot be judged and that enable the intellect to make judgments as instantiated reasons are compared with intelligible ones.³¹ According to Rist, the *a priori* rules are not only given through divine illumination, but illumination is also required for the use of the rules in teaching and learning.³² In both cases, it is Christ who illumines. He initially impresses the divine ideas on the human intellect, and He mysteriously, interiorly, enables the intellect to teach and learn by means of the rules, and thus illumines in an ongoing sense.³³ The light that makes things knowable to the mind is not the mind itself, consequently, but God, or His Forms, as it was for Plato. Although the rules are accessible to all, it is only those who put faith in Christ and open themselves up to His influence by shunning the distractions that come through the senses that become aware that it is His ideas that are impressed in the soul and constitute the human power of knowing. This awareness is what makes the knowing agent certain about the things outside the self, the self itself, and God.³⁴

By positing the role of innate rules of judgment received through illumination, the use of which is regulated by Christ the illuminator, Augustine saves knowledge from scepticism and affirms the possibility of teaching and learning in *De magistro*. Incidentally, virtually all innatist interpreters of Augustine focus their hermeneutic efforts on this dialogue and turn to other texts primarily to supplement the inquiry into *De magistro*. Augustine avoids scepticism in this work by affirming that human minds are wholly dependent upon the extrinsic help of Christ in their own acts of knowing. While this interpretation of *De magistro*, according to which ideas of things are latent in the human mind and summoned up by Christ, is the most seemingly obvious interpretation of the text read at face value, and is therefore widely though variously affirmed, it is not without problems. Many of the problems to which the ontologist interpretation is subject apply to the innatist one as well: the innatist account seems to bypass normal

³⁰ JOHN. RIST, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p.31

³¹ JOHN. RIST, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p. 50, 76

³² JOHN. RIST, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p. 32, 77

³³ JOHN. RIST, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p. 37, 78

³⁴ JOHN. RIST, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p. 66

cognitive processes. The supernatural appears to overtake the natural. As Ronald Nash has argued, “any account of Augustine’s...doctrine of illumination must deal satisfactorily with three paradoxes in his thought,”³⁵ namely, that Augustine describes the intellect as both active and passive; that he speaks of the Forms the mind knows as in the mind and outside the mind, or in the mind of God; and thirdly, that he describes the human mind as the light that does not make knowledge possible.

Franciscanism, Idealism, & Formalism

The classic Franciscan interpretation of illumination formulated by Bonaventure and his colleagues, which holds that illumination is the source of a priori or ‘transcendental’ concepts, which are impressed on the ‘active intellect’. On this account, the reasons are not the objects of knowledge as in the two foregoing interpretations. Rather, they supervise the intellect’s efforts to organize empirical data and form ideas about reality. They ensure that the ideas formed directly correspond to the ideas in the mind of God and therefore certify them. Some early thirteenth-century Franciscans like William of Auvergne, Roger Bacon, and Roger Marston affirmed with the Arab scholar Avicenna that the active intellect is actually God Himself: that it is the divine rather than the human mind that oversees human knowing.

The idealist interpretation of illumination Bruce Bubacz has advanced it by striking resemblance to the Franciscan interpretation.³⁶ For Bubacz, illumination is the source of a priori concepts, which he calls ‘principal ideas’. One gains access to these ideas when one attends to the ‘inner man’, where the ideas are stored. The fact that the principal ideas are innate does not undermine the empirical sources of human knowledge, Bubacz insists. On what he calls his ‘cartographic model’, the principal ideas only provide a blueprint or map for comprehending the ‘terrain’ of created reality and for classifying the objects encountered there. In sum, the principal ideas act as rules of judgment.

Formalism is the interpretation of Augustinian illumination espoused by Etienne Gilson. According to Gilson, Augustine did not give a fully developed or systematic account of knowledge. Even so, he apparently believed the mind is naturally competent to produce its own ideas. The divine light is the natural light

³⁵ RONALD. NASH, *The Light of the Mind*, p.104

³⁶ B. BUBACZ, *Saint Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge: A Contemporary Analysis* (New York: Edwin Mellin Press, 1981)

of the human intellect. For this reason, it cannot be said that God “takes the place of the intellect when it thinks the truth.”³⁷ Illumination, in short, leaves the integrity of the human intellect intact. Although Gilson denies that divine ideas are impressed upon the mind to produce the content of cognition itself, he does affirm that the innate ideas act as the rules by which the mind validates its own ideas. Illumination, in other words, plays a regulative or formal role in cognition, confirming that human judgments are absolutely true and certain. Although illumination and the a priori concepts it affords do not threaten to impose the content of cognition when interpreted in any of the three aforementioned ways, it does seem to interfere in some sense with the process of cognition, especially when God Himself is defined as the active intellect. Where the divine light guarantees the truth and certitude of the mind’s ideas on behalf of the mind, it seemingly reduces the intellect to a state of passivity in its own cognitive activity.³⁸ This means the truth and certitude of the mind’s knowledge is somewhat artificial, and the artificial nature of knowledge may lead to scepticism as regards the possibility of attaining true and certain knowledge.

Evaluation and Conclusion

It is a fact that all men agree that man is a knowing being. This seems to be a very hard fact to deny in today’s world that centralizes the importance of knowledge. Nevertheless, in the present time, with the mediation of specialized processes of knowledge, it has become clear that human being takes certain necessary processes to come to a total grasp of the object of knowledge, and that his knowledge in most cases is far from being perfect. Therefore, “when it comes to asking how man knows, what he does know, and what he can know, philosophers offered different answers.”³⁹

Everyday life shows how concerned each of us is to discover for ourselves, beyond mere opinions, how things really are. Within visible creation, man is the only creature who not only is capable of knowing but who knows that he knows, and is therefore interested in the real truth of what he perceives. People cannot be genuinely indifferent to the question of whether what they know is true or not. If

³⁷ GILSON. ETIENNE, *The Christian of St. Augustine*, trans. L.E.M. Lynch (London: Victor Gollancz, 1961) p. 79

³⁸ RONALD. NASH, *The Light of the Mind*, p. 104

³⁹ A. MANN AND F. KREYCHE, (ed). *Reflections on Man: Reading in philosophical psychology from Classical philosophy and Existentialism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966, p. 13

they discover that it is false, they reject it; but if they can establish its truth, they feel themselves rewarded.

Everything about man is mutable and changing. For this reason, necessary truth cannot be contained in the knowledge gained from the flux of experience. Thus, human mind cannot attain the immutable, unchangeable, and necessary truth which underlines reality. Therefore, this immutable and necessary truth can only come from God through the medium of divine illumination. Hence, anybody in search of the intelligible and unchangeable truth must be rightly positioned to have his mind divinely illuminated. In other words, certainty, reality, and necessary truth can only come through divine illumination.

Since the mind is mutable. It is certainly liable to errors. It is not therefore the case that the mind cannot attain some level of certainty, but such is not a necessary, an immutable and unchangeable one. Then, it cannot form a solid and strong base for epistemic edifice. This is the reason for Augustine's argument for the need of an immutable, unchangeable and necessary entity which can serve as the strong foundation for the intelligible truth. Since God necessarily exists as an unchangeable and immutable entity then such foundation must be sought in him. And since the mind cannot attain this intelligible truth itself, then it needs some divine assistance.

In spite of flaws in Augustine's theory of knowledge (divine illumination), his tremendous relevance and contribution towards the comprehension of knowledge is worthy of appraisal. In his work, he presents a project that is thought-provoking and research prompting. Augustine's work serves as a critique against skeptics who doubted the possibility of knowledge.